



Welcome to recent posts from the Stemke Consulting Group's [Know-How blog](#). Our purpose is to share ideas and stimulate discussion to help you achieve outcomes in business growth, talent development, workforce performance, cost optimization and innovation.

In this issue we focus on two ways to increase workforce performance: using a mental model to teach employees how to think like your experts and driving substantial business results with social learning. Employee engagement is a critical issue for both performance and retention. Timothy Clark's book "The Employee Engagement Mindset" helps leaders understand the behaviors of highly engaged employees and how to reinforce them to tap the hidden potential of your workforce.

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### The Mental Model: Thinking like an Expert

Many companies are caught between a rock and a hard place. As experts with critical knowledge walk out the door carrying years of experience, their replacements often aren't ready to take over, much less perform at a competent level. Wouldn't it be great if you could teach your employees to think like your best experts?

#### Becoming an Expert

True expertise has three features: it must deliver performance that is consistently superior to that of other practitioners; it must lead to successful outcomes; and it must produce repeatable results. Ericsson's research<sup>1</sup> shows that expert-level performance is not just a result of innate talent or genetics; it can be created by years of deliberate practice and coaching.

This level of performance takes time – 10,000 hours of training over ten years is a common benchmark. In addition, it requires the guidance of a skilled coach or mentor who can give constructive feedback and introduce challenges that drive higher levels of performance. While many companies need a small core of experts acting as thought leaders to create competitive advantage, not everyone needs to perform at the expert level. Still, it takes many years for new hires to become competent performers, able to make good risk-based decisions with minimal guidance.

Fortunately, there are two practical methods you can use to significantly cut the time it takes for employees to reach a competent performance level: eliciting mental models and coaching.

#### A Mental Model

An expert seems able to observe a situation, quickly recognize relevant characteristics and almost immediately recall solutions that have worked in the past or even suggest a new approach by synthesizing results from past experiences. Ericsson<sup>2</sup> describes this performance as an ability to efficiently encode the knowledge of events and solutions using the most important domain-related concepts learned over years of practice. Rapid retrieval of solutions follows as much of the situation's information can be filtered out. Less experienced

practitioners take much longer to determine what really matters. These key concepts form the expert's mental model.

I have found that many experts are able to articulate these key characteristics. They can also describe patterns of characteristics they have observed in both good and abnormal situations. This knowledge can be efficiently mapped and taught to less experienced practitioners; significantly reducing the years of trial and error spent trying to figure out what is important. The mental model is a useful framework, like the index for a filing cabinet. To think like an expert, practitioners need to use the model to catalog experiences in their personal knowledgebase of problems and solutions.

If the only way to really learn is by doing, is there any way to accelerate the acquisition of meaningful experience?

#### Coaching

A coach or mentor can further accelerate competency by providing feedback as the practitioner observes and interprets information and forms conclusions and proposed actions. He or she can also share additional, less common examples that add to the mentee's knowledgebase. But if your company is like most, your experts are already fully engaged in projects or other assignments. You can't afford to give them time for coaching. Or can you?

Not only are experts interested in serving as coaches in the later years of their careers (it helps to combat burnout), it is actually cost effective for your company to have them do this. Instead of being assigned to a single project, an expert can coach several junior practitioners, each of whom is assigned to a project beyond their current capability. With the expert in a coaching role (this is a great opportunity for retirees), the project is guaranteed to have the best available knowledge. The mentee gains tremendous experience by doing the hand's on work under the expert's guidance and review. The expert is able to influence the success of several projects while accelerating the learning of several others.

This is a four-way win for the projects, the expert, the junior practitioners and the organization.

1. "The Making of An Expert", K. Anders Ericsson, Michael, J. Prietula and Edward T. Cokely, Harvard Business Review, July-August, 2007
2. "Expert Performance and Deliberate Practice", K. Anders Ericsson, 2000

## Driving Business Results with Social Learning

“Social Learning” is the latest term used to describe the informal knowledge transfer that happens through conversations, mentoring and website posting. Nurtured properly, it can create a natural learning ecosystem that augments formal training and stimulates productivity and workforce performance. The recent explosion of social media tools such as Facebook, Yammer, Wikis and Blogs has made it much easier to connect with colleagues to share information, ask and answer questions and innovate.

The “social” angle is not new. Similar collaborative knowledge sharing systems have been deployed by knowledge management (KM) groups for more than twenty years. One lesson learned by KM practitioners is that technology alone does not inspire long-term activity or create measurable business value. Two other ingredients are critical: context and behaviors. To be effective, a social learning implementation needs to be organized into multiple contexts aligned with skills, competencies or processes. With clear boundaries, learners understand where to seek or share information, and who might be able to answer questions or provide advice. A few examples will illustrate the approach and resulting value.

After a merger that added many international refineries, a client needed to find a way for the new colleagues to leverage existing technical expertise. Refining leadership championed the development of a new global network to connect technical experts, refinery engineers and operators to enable them to search for answers or ask questions concerning day-to-day operating problems, to share successful practices, and to tap into a wide variety of refining knowledge in a single location.

To ensure quick response to urgent questions, the web-based system features an email-enabled process that directs questions to a subset of over 1500 members who have registered their willingness to provide answers in a few of over 200 subject categories. Usually a question receives 2-4 responses within several days. But if no answer is submitted, the question is escalated to technical experts who are responsible for the subject area. Since the launch in 2004, over \$100 million of costs savings has been documented.

Social learning was a success factor for another of the client’s critical business strategies – Operational Excellence (OE). OE focuses on safety, health, environment, reliability and efficiency. Project teams were created to define best practices in each OE focus area. We created a community of practice (CoP) for each team that included employees who would be responsible for global rollout. These CoPs had an executive sponsor, a clear charter and operating plan and used a website and monthly meetings to share deployment experiences and collaborate on improvements to the associated practices and methods. The knowledge transferred in these CoPs was recognized as an important factor in creating and sustaining world-class health and safety performance.

## Book Review – Employee Engagement Mindset

[“The Employee Engagement Mindset - The Six Drivers for Tapping into the Hidden Potential of Everyone in Your Company”](#), by Timothy R. Clark, McGraw-Hill (2012)

Engagement should be a win-win partnership between a company and its employees. Employees gain professional skills and personal satisfaction when working with energy, purpose and passion. The company retains people longer, innovates faster and achieves better business results.

Sadly, Clark found that 75% of employees are not fully engaged with their work. They are often bored or burned out. Many are waiting for the organization to engage them. He interviewed committed employees and found that they had a different mindset that became the driving force for their own engagement, with characteristics such as:

- Taking responsibility for their own engagement and take deliberate steps to become engaged.
- Feeling the least entitled, understanding they must manage their employability on an ongoing basis.
- Engaging customers, revealing their level of engagement at the customer interface.
- Remaining highly engaged in all kinds of settings at work and in their personal lives.
- Consistently applying behavioral drivers to sustain high levels of engagement over time.

Clark outlines six behaviors that drive their engagement.

1. **Connect:** They expand their connections to their work, their colleagues, and the organization.
2. **Shape:** They customize their professional experience based on their preferences, while pursuing the organization’s goals.
3. **Learn:** They learn at or above the speed of change to keep their professional skills up-to-date and retain their value to the organization.
4. **Stretch:** They build their capacity by stretching out of their comfort zones and pushing to outer limits.
5. **Achieve:** When employees achieve, they become more engaged.
6. **Contribute:** Contributing beyond “self” toward a meaningful purpose produces a more powerful kind of engagement.

Clark provides ideas on how to strengthen these behaviors. For example, relationships formed in business and personal networks are a part of a healthy balanced lifestyle, providing fulfillment and engagement. But an over-reliance on digital means of communication makes it much harder to develop meaningful relationships.

Read Clark’s book to discover other ways to reinforce the behaviors that shape an employee’s engagement mindset and lead to greater business results.

*Learn how you can increase business growth through talent development, innovation and cost reduction.*

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